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ABSTRACT

The booklet examines issues involved in the physical battering, sexual misuse, or emotional maltreatment of adolescents. The nature and extent of physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse are briefly addressed, as are possible consequences, including withdrawal, mistrust, and suicide. Signs of abuse are linked to physical characteristics (such as hunger and uncleanliness) and school behavior (including verbal and physical aggression). Teachers are urged to follow guidelines on reporting and to become aware of helpful community resources. Avenues of approaching the youth are discussed, as are ways to deal with behavior problems. Also encouraged are providing success and praise, sharing information, holding classroom discussions, and talking with parents. School systems should review the reporting system, provide staff training, offer programs for youth, and work with parents. (CL)

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HOW SCHOOLS AND EDUCATORS CAN HELP

# Abused Adolescents

Over the years, Boys Town has provided a haven for hundreds of "social orphans" — abused and neglected adolescents. Here, they receive emotional, educational, spiritual, and physical care. Thousands of other abused youth in this nation, however, receive little or no help at all; many are never even identified.

To be of service to more of these adolescents, Boys Town has prepared this booklet for schools and their staffs. I trust that as teachers and counselors, using the booklet as an aid, discover abused and neglected youngsters among their students, they will give these youth the special care they so desperately need.

Rev. Robert P. Hupp
Executive Director
Father Flanagan's Boys' Home

Abuse—the word brings to mind images of battered infants and ragged, hungry children. But adolescents are abused too. A 1981 government-funded study estimated that almost half of the 650,000 children abused and neglected yearly are 12 years of age or older. Three-quarters of these adolescents are never reported or referred to a child protective services agency for help.

Adolescent abuse—the physical battering, sexual misuse, or emotional maltreatment of youth—has been a hidden tragedy for several reasons. Adolescents, being older and smarter, may hide or explain away bruises caused by physical abuse. The scars from emotional neglect or sexual abuse may not be easily recognized as such. And most importantly, some abused adolescents behave in alienating and provocative ways, making it difficult to view them as victims.

Adolescent abuse shatters family relationships. Its effects also ripple through the school, community, and society. Abuse may influence youth to turn to delinquency, vandalism, truancy, running away, sexual promiscuity or prostitution, alcohol and drug abuse, or even suicide.

In recent years, schools have become involved in the problem of child abuse. They now are the most important source of abuse and neglect reports—schools initiated 50% of the reports in one national study. Because the problems and needs of teenagers are different from those of children and because most cases of adolescent abuse still go unreported, this booklet is designed to highlight these special problems and to suggest what schools and individual educators can do to help these troubled youth.

# The Problem

About half of all abused adolescents, according to one study, were battered or neglected as infants, and the maltreatment simply continued into adolescence. Abuse in these families is often blamed on social and economic stresses such as poverty, unemployment, marital troubles, or alcoholism.

For the other half, however, the abuse only begins when the child grows older. These families come from all economic levels—from the poorest to the very wealthy. Adolescents, especially girls, are becoming sexually mature and are more often the reported victims of sexual abuse than are younger children. In other families, problems associated with raising an adolescent trigger physical or emotional abuse. In contrast to infants, the adolescent may play a more active role in angering or frustrating the parent who reacts by abusing the teenager. Conflict generated when the youth stays out too late, runs off with the car, gets picked up by the police, or comes home drunk erupts into violence.

## Physical Abuse

Studies have found that physical abuse of boys declines as they get older, but increases with age for girls. Physical abuse happens more often in families where there is parental alcoholism or drug use or where physical assault is a regular approach to discipline. However, it sometimes occurs in relatively normal families when a parent suddenly can't handle some adolescent misbehavior and explodes with violence.

"Kids can be provocative," says Dr. James Garbarino, a psychologist at Pennsylvania State University. "The frustration of being responsible for, but not really being able to control or prevent, a teenager's behavior plagues these parents. They argue, scream, and suddenly the parent loses control and clobbers the child with something handy."

"I came home drunk," one teenager admitted. "My dad started screaming at me, I yelled back, my mom was in the middle of it, and then whammo—he started slugging me."

## Emotional Abuse

For many adolescents, abuse is emotional rather than physical, but just as damaging. For example, a parent may refuse to support the teenager, locking him or her out of the house. A Washington, D.C., runaway house discovered that one-third of the adolescents in its program had been thrown out of their homes.

Some teenagers are continually criticized, harassed, and humiliated by their parents. Others are severely limited in their movements and activities—grounded for weeks and even months at a time. One teenager reported being confined to her bedroom for six months. To eat or use the bathroom, she had to ask for her father's permission.

## Sexual Abuse

Unfortunately, sexual abuse—by a relative, parent, older sibling, or family acquaintance—is much more common than people believe. Accurate data are difficult to obtain, but according to one national survey, 1% of all children between the ages of 12 and 18 are victims of some form of sexual abuse, ranging from exhibitionism to intercourse. Adolescents are victims in 71% of all substantiated reports of sexual abuse.

Some sexual abuse involves force or the threat of violence. All cases, however, represent a misuse of power and the child's emotional attachment to the abuser.

## Consequences

In cases of sexual abuse, the teenaged victim may react by becoming withdrawn, mistrustful of adults, or sometimes

suicidal. "I tried to kill myself three or four times," said one adolescent. "You don't want to exist anymore."

Some mistakenly feel guilty that they caused the abuse or did not object to it strongly enough in the beginning. Others may feel trapped into silence. According to another victim of sexual abuse, "I couldn't tell anyone. I was afraid it would break up the family—my mother wouldn't love me, and my father would kill himself."

These adolescents may never feel safe in their own homes. Some take the first opportunity to leave by running away, moving out after graduation, or marrying early.

Those adolescents who have been physically abused may become extremely aggressive themselves—violent with their parents, bullying with peers, loud and rude with teachers. They may use such behavior to "test" other adults to see if they will react as their abusing parents do.

These adolescents often begin compiling records of run-ins with school authorities and the law. Such behavior tends to disguise the fact that they have been abused. Many of them come in contact with the juvenile justice or social welfare systems as "offenders"—runaways, truants, delinquents—rather than as "victims." As a result, only the youth's behavior, not the family abuse, is seen and treated as the problem.

These children need help to break free of the web of abuse, psychological damage, and self-destructive behavior in which they become entangled. Committed school personnel can make a difference in the lives of these adolescents by watching for the signs of abuse, helping suspected victims find available services, and most importantly, developing personal, helping relationships with youths they suspect have been abused.

# Signs of Abuse

Abused adolescents can be difficult to identify. They may be silent and withdrawn. They may make plausible excuses for injuries. Many may cover their hurt with belligerent behavior that antagonizes anyone who comes too close. Finally, some nonabused youth may show the same kinds of behavior. However, some outward or physical clues may indicate an adolescent is being abused or neglected and needs help. An abused teenager may:

- Be bruised, scratched, or cut often and offer only vague explanations of "accidents."
- Have an untreated medical problem.
- Often be hungry or dirty.
- Run away from home repeatedly.
- Often miss or be late for school.
- Be frequently left alone at night or locked out of the house for long periods.
- Be involved in alcohol or drug abuse.
- Be unusually afraid of what a parent will do when he or she finds out about some misbehavior or mistake by the youth.
- Arrive at school very early and leave late.
- Have parents who refuse to become involved in school activities and do not respond to teachers' notes.

Additionally, abused adolescents may have trouble with personal relationships at school. Their parents may have been poor role models for such social skills as getting along with others, talking over differences, and compromising to solve problems. As a result, in school the youths may:

- Be verbally and physically aggressive with others.
- Have few friends or delinquent friends.
- Have difficulty relating to or trusting adults.
- "Test" others by rejecting their concern or friendship, provoking their anger, or displaying alienating behavior.
- Show low self-esteem by being very withdrawn and lacking in social and intellectual self-confidence or by being braggardly and overly critical of others.

These signs may not necessarily indicate a youth is the victim of abuse because they can occur for other reasons, but a frequent pattern of these behaviors should at least signal that the cause of the problem might be abuse and needs to be investigated.

# What You Can Do

If you discover or suspect that an adolescent has been abused, you should first follow your school or district guidelines on reporting the case to the proper agency or authority. In deciding whether or not the evidence of abuse is strong enough to report the case, talk to your principal, superintendent, or school nurse. Because almost all states require educators to report suspected abuse cases, many schools have developed policies and procedures to deal with such situations.

Your school may also have a list of community resources available to help the student and his or her family who should be encouraged to seek professional counseling, family therapy, or legal assistance if needed. Some communities have local chapters of national self-help organizations for abused adolescents. Daughters and Sons United (P. O. Box 952, San Jose, California 95108) aids victims of sexual abuse and may have a chapter in your area. Parents Anonymous (22330 Hawthorne Blvd., Suite 208, Torrance, California 90505) an organization of parents who have abused their children, sometimes runs programs for youths. The local mental health center or child protective services agency may know of other services for abused adolescents in your community.

Although many abused youths have been helped by professional services, the support of other informal, personal relationships may be just as vital to such an adolescent. Having someone—a friend, teacher, coach, counselor, friend's parent—with whom the youth can feel accepted and can

"practice being likeable" can help an abused teenager become an emotionally healthy adult, according to Dr. Robert Friedman of the Florida Mental Health Institute. Also helpful is having a hobby, playing a sport, or holding a job where the adolescent can succeed and win approval for a socially appropriate achievement.

"It is the kids who fail at school, who don't have friends, who aren't really interested in anything that we worry about," says Dr. Friedman.

As an educator, you may be able to help an adolescent you know or suspect is being abused in one or more of the following ways.

## Approaching the Youth

"I always thought there was something wrong with me," said a girl who had been abused by her parents, "and that made it hard to get close to people. I didn't think I was good enough. I found it hard to communicate with them and show my real feelings."

It may take some perseverance to reach a youth who finds it difficult to discuss problems with others or whose aggressive behavior discourages your approach. Therefore, you might look for moments when the teenager is relaxed and receptive to your invitation to talk. This might come more naturally following an athletic practice if you are a coach or an extracurricular activity that you supervise than during classroom hours.

Approach the adolescent in an open, nonjudgmental way. He or she needs to be reassured that it is acceptable to discuss feelings; perhaps you can share some of yours. If the student is willing to talk, you can help the youth pinpoint family or school problems and their causes. Encourage the youth to come up with a number of possible solutions to the problem and to choose one to act upon. Then demonstrate that

you care about the outcome by checking to see if the student has followed through on the commitment.

## Dealing with Behavior Problems

You can encourage appropriate behavior in the youth by demonstrating it in the way you act—explain how you feel at times when students are rude, inconsiderate, or when they listen and cooperate. Show them how to handle criticism appropriately. Demonstrate that anger, hurt, or frustration can be dealt with positively by keeping your temper, setting limits on behavior, and enforcing rules calmly and consistently.

Avoid being manipulated into rejecting the youth. If he or she is provocative, you do not have to condone or put up with it. Ignore it, or come back to the student at another time to show you don't like the youth's aggressiveness but still want to be a friend. Find some positive qualities, however small, to focus on when you interact with him or her.

## Providing Success and Praise

Abuse erodes an adolescent's self-esteem. Success in school, in a sport, or on the job may help restore it. You can play a part by watching for and praising a youth's achievements such as completing an assignment, doing well on a test, assisting a classmate, volunteering for a task, or contributing to an extracurricular activity. If these opportunities do not occur often enough naturally, you might design special tasks or assignments that offer the youth a chance to accomplish them and receive appropriate praise. As the youth grows in confidence, the assignments can become more challenging.

## Sharing Information

Your time with any particular student is limited; you may see a troubled youth for only an hour each day in a class of other students. Therefore, sharing information, exchanging ideas, and agreeing on consistent methods of dealing with the student with other teachers create a network of support for both you and the abused adolescent. You may also discover that another staff member—a coach, activity supervisor, librarian, etc.—shares an interest, talent, or rapport with the student and can more easily be the special mentor he or she needs.

## Holding Classroom Discussions

Where appropriate, you can show films, assign readings, and lead class discussions on handling feelings, coping with family problems, and understanding abuse and violence. These may allow a victim to think or talk about abuse in a nonthreatening atmosphere or may suggest courses of action not recognized before by the youth.

A discussion of abuse may also alert other students to previously unsuspected victims among them. An abused adolescent might find talking to a classmate the easiest first step to take in seeking help. Therefore, students should be informed about school and community services and should know that you are available to listen and help.

## Talking with Parents

Without confronting parents over the issue of abuse, you can use regularly scheduled parent conferences to discuss how they might contribute to the student's academic performance and school behavior. Suggest to them appropriate ways to respond to their son's or daughter's achievements and failures. Explain how agreements between parent and teenager can be negotiated that call for the youth to fulfill

certain school and home responsibilities with the parent providing rewards or privileges only as the tasks are completed.

Encourage parents to participate in school activities. This will help them to meet other families and to see how others handle adolescent and family troubles. If the parents openly admit to having problems at home or ask for advice, suggest that they try new discipline techniques, join a parent training class, or perhaps seek family therapy or counseling. Have the name and telephone number of a community clinic or referral service at hand.

# What the School Can Do

Many school systems have recognized the scope and severity of child abuse, have organized awareness programs, and have established reporting procedures. Perhaps it is time to re-examine your school's situation and response to the problems of abused adolescents and their particular needs.

## Reviewing the Reporting System

A committee of teachers and administrators might decide to review the school's child abuse evidence criteria and reporting system. Is the system being used? Are evidence guidelines workable and realistic? Are new teachers routinely informed of the procedures, and are all staff members made aware of changes? Are lists of community resources and services kept current? Does the school have good working relationships with the local child protective services agency, the police, and social welfare personnel? Does someone have responsibility for following up on cases reported to the authorities? Some schools have one person or a team of staff members handle all reports so that they are complete, timely, and consistent.

## Providing Staff Training

Your school might offer training sessions on how to identify and help abused adolescents and how to work with parents of such teenagers. An in-service workshop can be led by a staff member from child protective services or another special agency. Information on available services can be brought up to date and ideas shared. Plans for working with individual students can be drawn up and coordinated among all staff members.

## Offering Programs for Youth

An educator's time is limited, and helping an abused youth is only one of many important, time-consuming duties a teacher may have. Therefore, a school may choose to try a more comprehensive approach by organizing a peer counseling program or a self-help group for identified and suspected adolescent abuse victims led by one or a team of teachers or counselors. Such a group (described in the "Youth Helping Youth" guide listed in the next section) can provide an adolescent with empathic peers and with caring adults. The program reassures the youth of the school's ongoing concern and support. It is also an opportunity to learn social skills and build self-esteem, enabling the adolescents to feel more confident of their abilities and better prepared to function independently and responsibly.

## Working with Parents

If your school system runs an adult education program, a parent training course can be offered to explain techniques for effective discipline, communicating and negotiating with teenagers, settling family disputes, and fair fighting. (One parent training program, "Active Parenting," is described in the following section.) Or, your school's parent-teacher organization can conduct one-night workshops on parenting or teenage problems.

Schools can also plan activities (parent-child dinners, recreational events, or dances) that bring parents and students into contact with other families. Studies have shown that social isolation characterizes many child-abusing families. Parents are less likely to abuse their children if their relationships are open to scrutiny by others, if they can compare and exchange childrearing techniques with other parents, and if they have some outlets for social activity.

## Being an Advocate for Children

If there is a local group of organizations whose major concern is preventing child abuse or improving the welfare of children, your school may want to participate. If there is no such group, the school might consider leading a campaign to increase community awareness of adolescent abuse or working with other agencies to provide services for such youth. The possibilities for teacher, student, and parent involvement in community activities are many—poster displays, essay contests, production of public service messages for local radio and television stations, a community "hotline" for troubled parents or teenagers, etc.

# Readings and Resources

If you wish to read more about adolescent and child abuse, the following articles and books contain additional information.

Fisher, Nancy. *Reaching Out: The Volunteer in Child Abuse and Neglect Programs.* (Washington, D.C.: National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979).

Garbarino, James and Anne C. Garbarino. *Maltreatment of Adolescents.* (Chicago: National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, 1982).

Garbarino, James and Gwen Gilliam. *Understanding Abusive Families.* (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1980).

National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. *Study Findings: National Study of the Incidence and Severity of Child Abuse and Neglect.* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1981).

Straus, Murray, Richard Gelles, and Suzanne Steinmetz. *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family.* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980).

In addition, Boys Town has produced a film on adolescent abuse and several books that can be used by educators in school programs. They include:

*Don't Get Stuck There.* An award-winning 14-minute, 16mm, color film for teenagers to help them understand and cope with abuse or recognize when a friend may be an abuse victim. (This film can be viewed free of charge or purchased for $100.)

*Youth Helping Youth: A Directed Group Experience for Abused Adolescents.* A 44-page booklet for teachers, youth care workers, volunteers, and professional trainers describing how to organize and run a self-help group for abused adolescents. ($2.50)

*Active Parenting: A Trainer's Manual.* A 150-page guide for teachers, trainers, and counselors outlining a method of teaching effective child behavior management skills to parents. ($6.95)

Copies of or more information about these materials may be obtained by writing to the Communications and Public Service Division, Boys Town, Nebraska 68010.

For information about its urban high school program for disadvantaged youth, write: Boys Town Urban Program, Boys Town, NE 68010

For additional copies of this booklet, write: Communications & Public Service Division, Boys Town, NE 68010